

ATLAS, POVETKIN IN UPHILL FIGHT FOR HEAVYWEIGHT TITLE

Written by Ron Borges
Friday, 26 August 2011 06:33



photo Jens Meyer, AP

Sometimes folks grow so used to seeing people do the wrong thing that when someone does the right thing they think it's wrong. Teddy Atlas is the latest to be victimized by what we'll call the "Right Way Is Wrong" syndrome.

Saturday night Atlas will lead heavyweight contender Alexander Povetkin into a ring in Erfurt, Germany to face former champion Ruslan Chagaev for the somewhat vacant WBA title. It's not really vacant since Wladimir Klitschko owns it but the alphabet organizations have a way of always making room for an extra sanction fee one way or another and so they have in this case.

Klitschko is now a unified "super" champion and so the title is "vacant" even while he still wears it. If you are confused, welcome to boxing.

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Confusion reigns in this sport, which is why so few sports fans care about it anymore. In boxing up is down, right is wrong and making the wise decision is a vice not a virtue.

A year or so ago Atlas rejected a shot at Klitschko for young Povetkin because, of all reasons, with only 19 professional fights he wasn't going to sacrifice his future for a payday. That cost Atlas about \$200,000 and, frankly, Povetkin about the same because of the way his contract would be stepped on by promoters, managers and their various agents and minions.

There is a risk-reward ratio in boxing that must always be measured. The usual way they do it in boxing is you make the fighter take the risk and you keep most of the rewards. Atlas sees it differently, which is why he rejected the fight and was highly criticized by the No Nothing Party for it.

His job, as he sees it, is to not only train young Povetkin but also to put him in fights that make sense. There might be a time it made sense to risk him against the bigger, harder punching and vastly more experienced Klitschko but that was not the time. That will remain true regardless of what happens Saturday night in Erfret, even though some will argue otherwise.

If Povetkin loses, Atlas' critics will say he got him beat for short money. They will say he could have made vastly more against Klitschko, which is true if you only look at the gross and forget about the net. In boxing, as with the IRS, the net is all that matters and what Povetkin was going to net against Klitschko was very likely a career-altering beating for very short money.

Saturday night the money is no better but his chance to win is. At least it would have been had Povetkin's management team allowed (or forced if necessary) him to come to America as was his contractual obligation and train for eight weeks with Atlas.

Atlas' deal with Povetkin has always been that he would travel to Russia to train him when his work at ESPN allowed. But during the ESPN2 fight season, which ends with the beginning of college football and begins in January, the fighter was supposed to train in the U.S.

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This time he did not, for reasons really only known to Povetkin and his manager, and Atlas refused to put his full-time job at risk simply to please them. Ultimately he decided he would not train Povetkin at all for the biggest fight of his life, a decision they refused to accept. Atlas remained firm until his phone rang about a month ago and it was the 31-year-old Povetkin, who speaks little English, calling just to say hello.

Not long after that, at a press conference in Germany to hype the fight, writers noticed Atlas was missing and asked Povetkin who his trainer was. He said "Teddy Atlas."

At that point, for the second time in his two-year stint with the former Olympic gold medalist, Atlas did what others would not. He put himself at risk.

Just as he stood up to German promoter Wilfried Sauerland, refusing to send Povetkin like a lamb to the slaughter against a far more experienced and well prepared Klitschko, he stood up against his own instincts and got on a plane to Russia knowing it was far too late for the kind of full training camp one needs for a fight of this magnitude.

In both cases, Atlas did what far too few do in boxing. He did the right thing and yet if Povetkin's hand isn't raised Saturday night he's going to catch hell. That's what happens in boxing. You try to do the right thing and you catch hell. You roll over and conduct business as usual and everybody thinks you're smart, a realist or both.

My colleague Eric Raskin postulated several days ago that if Povetkin loses, Atlas' career as a top-flight trainer is over because he will be perceived as someone who blocked his fighter from an opportunity and then got him beaten for a lesser opportunity.

Someone who sees what happened in these two cases that way should not be licensed to box because their vision is impaired. Protecting your fighter from a match he isn't ready for is not something to be vilified for. It's good business.

Sticking by him even when the people around him – either through ignorance, arrogance or worse, corruption – break their contractual obligations to his trainer and create a problem-filled

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work environment in the months before the biggest fight of his life should not be something other fighters fear. It should be something they seek.

“What happened was it got to be about three weeks before the fight and the fighter himself and the people asked me to come over and I found out that they had made no other arrangements and the fighter was waiting for me and I had a decision to make, more from a personal standpoint, I guess a moral standpoint where – do I stay away from it?” Atlas said this week.

“Because we didn’t have the situation that was agreed to, my brain told me that a little bit, but my heart told me, do I want to be thinking about the fighter being left alone? And I didn’t want to be thinking about that.

“So I got on a plane. I went to (Chekhov, Russia) about three weeks and two days before the fight and as I said, we had a very condensed training camp, not the amount of sparring that we would normally want to have, especially southpaw sparring because we are fighting a southpaw.

“I organized things the best I could from a mental standpoint, trying to get his mind right in the time that was allowed and trying to get the – obviously the game plan, the strategy in place. I think we’ve done a good job getting the strategy in place. We understand what will work against Chagaev and what to be concerned about with Chagaev. My biggest concern was having not the full amount of time for physical training, that’s my biggest concern that we didn’t have that and the full amount of time in sparring.

“Look, either I’m going to keep my damn mouth shut and say nothing, which I probably should do sometimes, or I’m going to tell the truth. I’d feel more comfortable if I had more time. Do I feel we’ve done the best we could do in these conditions, in these circumstances? Yes, I do.”

Atlas is a realist. He sees the world not as he’d like it to be but as it is. He knows an ambush disguised as an opportunity is a trap, as the Klitschko fight was. He knows Povetkin was contractually bound to be in New Jersey two months ago and was prevented or allowed not to do it at his peril.

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Atlas was not willing, nor should he have been, to put his primary job at risk with ESPN for people who were not willing to honor their word, a contract or what was best for their fighter. Yet, in the end, he swallowed both his pride and his good sense and went to Russia three weeks and two days before Saturday night's fight to do what he could for a young man who still believes, "Teddy Atlas is my trainer."

If those things make him unemployable as a trainer it says more about boxing's ills than it does about Atlas.

On Saturday night Atlas will have run out of time but he'll be where he felt he needed to be. He'll be in Alexander Povetkin's corner. If a few other people claiming to be actually had been the fighter would have been at his optimum for the toughest fight of his career.

Come what may, Alexander Povetkin's real problem won't be the man in front of him or the man in his corner. His problems will be sitting in expensive seats they got for free wearing expensive suits guys like Povetkin paid for. They won't be in his corner when the fight starts. Then again, they never really were any way.

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